

OUT of HIDING

A Holocaust Survivor's
Journey to America

RUTH GRUENER

with Rachel Klein



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Escaping Death

I SUPPOSE IT'S FITTING that I've had seven names, considering how many times I've had to restart my life.

On my birth certificate, I'm Aurelia Czeslava Gamzer. My Hebrew name is Rachel Tcharne, which I was given to honor both my late grandmother and great-aunt. During my early childhood, I was called Rela (short for Aurelia), then Relunia, then Lunia, and finally, Luncia, my favorite nickname, which stuck.

Luncia Gamzer was my name throughout my childhood and adolescence. Many years later, in a new country, my name would change again—to Ruth Gruener. But, of course, I didn't know it then.

I was born on a warm August morning in the early 1930s, in a house on Wolynska Street in the city of Lvov, which at that time was part of Poland. When I was six weeks old, I caught pneumonia and almost died. I was unconscious, but the doctor revived me by dunking me in basins of cold and warm water. That was the first time I escaped death. It would not be the last.

I was a happy child, with wavy brown hair cut in a short bob just under my ears and wide, bright hazel eyes. I didn't have any siblings, but I had lots of friends who lived nearby. We'd meet up to play tag or jump rope, and we'd stay out until our mothers called us in to dinner. I loved to dance and play songs on my pink toy piano and pick out ice cream from the chocolate shop, called Sarotina, that my parents,

Barbara and Isaac Gamzer, owned. We were Jewish, and I knew that made us different from many of our neighbors who celebrated Christmas while we observed holidays like Hanukkah and Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish New Year). Still, I always felt at home in Lvov.

But the world around me was changing fast. A tyrant named Adolf Hitler had taken over as the leader of Germany. Hitler blamed all of Germany's problems on Jewish people. He was determined to conquer all of Europe and make it *Judenrein*—free of Jews. In November 1938 in Germany, more than 8,000 Jewish homes, businesses, and synagogues were ransacked. Jewish people were beaten and shot in public places, and many were taken away to camps. This became known as Kristallnacht, or Night of Broken Glass.

I was five years old when Germany invaded Poland, marking the beginning of World War II. I'll never forget the morning that the German army

marched into Lvov. Air raid sirens blared, followed by the sound of military planes and the smell of diesel fuel. Then came the whine of falling bombs and explosions.

“What is that noise?” I asked my father, confused and frightened. “I’m scared.”

“I won’t let anything happen to you,” he said, and swooped me up in his arms. “But we need to hurry.”

Tatu (“Father” in Polish) held me against his chest while he bounded down the stairs with Mama right behind us. Down in the cellar, I was terrified, but my father calmed me by telling me stories; he said that in heaven, there was a village where dolls could talk and walk on their own. I was transfixed; at that young age, I loved dolls, and the idea of seeing them walk and talk made me feel much less afraid. If I had to go to heaven, I reasoned, maybe it would be all right.

We spent days in the cellar until the bombing stopped. We came out of the cellar to learn that

the Russian army had successfully fought off the Germans and entered Lvov. Life under the Russians was difficult. But in 1941, things got much, much worse. The German army came back to fight again, and this time, they won.

Under the German occupation, the calculated mass extermination of the more than 200,000 Jews in Lvov began. It's remarkable how clearly you can see the truth in hindsight but not as it's happening in the moment.

First, there were small changes in the city. Suddenly, Jews were not allowed to go to school, so I had to stay home, not quite understanding why. Also, Jewish people had to wear white armbands with a blue Star of David, so we could be easily identified. Having a dirty armband could get you in trouble, so my mother opted for the plastic cuff kind that easily wiped clean. The Star of David was such a beautiful symbol—one traditionally worn by Jews to signify God's protection—and the Nazis' use of it tainted its

meaning. I hated wearing my armband, but I knew I had to have it on whenever I went outside.

It was all so strange. Why were we being persecuted, just for being Jewish? Only a short time ago, we had been equals in our community. So many of our non-Jewish neighbors, who had once respected us and been kind to us, were being brainwashed into turning against us. I could see it in the nasty, disapproving looks they shot us on the street and could feel it like a chill in the air.

And it felt like there was nothing we could do.

Every day it seemed there was a new rule. Jewish families were told to gather all their gold and silver and bring it to the synagogue to be confiscated. I looked on sadly as my mother took the silver candlesticks off our mantel. I knew they had belonged to my great-grandmother, and we'd used them to light the Shabbos candles every Friday night. Shabbos is the Sabbath, the Jewish day of rest, which begins on Friday evening and lasts until

Saturday evening. The beginning of Shabbos is marked by lighting candles and saying prayers over challah bread and wine. It's such a sweet, peaceful time, but now it felt as if we were losing some of that peace.

Next, we were told to turn in our furs. I remember my mother removing the gray fur lining from my favorite dark red winter coat and hat, and I felt a pang of sadness. It was only a coat and hat, but I was starting to understand that things were changing in a terrible way. After the fur went the furniture. The Nazis would break into people's homes and carry whatever they wanted—tables and chairs—onto trucks waiting in the street.

Jewish businesses were forced to close, so my parents had to shutter their chocolate shop, which was a terrible blow. We began to run out of money for food, so we resorted to eating boiled potatoes.

One afternoon, as my mother was boiling potatoes for dinner, a German soldier burst through the door.